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THE BATTLE OF MALVERN HILL

A POEM.

THE

Battle of Malvern Hill.

A POEM:

BY J. R. PARKE.

RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED
TO
GEN. GEORGE B. McCLELLAN.

"He has in many things been foully used."—SWIFT.

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THE BATTLE OF MALVERN HILL.

PROBABLY the highest tribute possible for an honorable and magnanimous soldier to receive, is that accorded by a defeated, but equally honorable and magnanimous enemy.

In considering Gen. McClellan's character as a soldier, and his claim to the justice, if not the gratitude, of his country, we should appeal to the men who stood beside and before him throughout his harrassing campaign in Virginia, rather than to those who, like Gen. Halleck and his omniscient confreres of the War Department, professed to know more respecting the relative position of the adverse armies before Richmond, than did those who purchased their knowledge at the price of blood and suffering.

Had the gray-haired Cæsar of the Confederacy been asked his opinion concerning the military qualities of his young opponent, he would have deemed it no discredit to his own reputation to admit that McClellan, even amid the embarrassing conditions which civil and governmental animosities brought upon him, had not only withstood the fiercest and most desperate fighting of the salamander Jackson, on the banks of the Chickahominy, but had baffled the boldly devised plans of Lee himself, to surround and crush him in the terrible morasses of White Oak Swamp; through which the brave General carried his broken army safely and triumphantly to the heights of Malvern.

John Esten Cooke, Lee's able biographer, gives us repeated assurances of the high estimate which that veteran commander

always entertained of McClellan's soldierly capabilities; and had Lee been questioned, after his defeat at Antietam, would unhesitatingly have credited his brave antagonist with preventing his projected advance into the territory of Pennsylvania, and administering a death-stroke to his long-cherished design of marching upon the Federal capital. McClellan's soldiers were the only obstacle to such a coup d'etat; and they consisted almost entirely of raw recruits, for whom he was indebted less to the Administration than to his own personal popularity.

This is neither the place nor time to assume the role of McClellan's apologist, and the impartial reader who may desire, even at this late date, to form a preference between the soldier of civilization and the leader of armed banditti; between the humanitarian McClellan, whom malice denounced, and the merciless Pope, whom partyism applauded, may be best guided by a careful reading of the report addressed by the former to President Lincoln, on the 7th of July, 1862, and contrasting its statesmanlike utterances with the arrogant flourish and savage spirit embodied in the manifesto which inaugurated Pope's assumption of command over the Federal army of Virginia; "the result of which," said a writer in a foreign periodical of the time, "cast mankind two centuries back towards barbarism."

Was McClellan a loyal soldier? The voice of the people says he was. Was he an able leader? The almost insuperable difficulties which opposed his every movement, and his final triumph over them all, shall yet dictate to history the proper answer.

The battle of Malvern Hill was the last of that series of engagements amid the swamps of the Chickahominy, through which McClellan effected his masterly retreat towards the James, and resulted in a severe defeat to the Confederate forces

THE BATTLE OF MALVERN HILL.

I.

The sun went down o'er the Virgin land,
But his parting beams were resting still
On the glittering bayonet, the flashing brand
And the burnished sheaths of the rebel band,
As they marched towards Malvern Hill.

II.

The long gray lines from left to right,
In stern succession greet the sight;
While even the mountain's bended head
Vibrated 'neath the measured tread
Of War's grim phalanx, onward flung,
Where yet the starry banner hung,
Which freedom's infant-hand unfurled
To wave above the Western world.

III.

The hoarse command from post to post
Was heard along that moving host;
And, echoing back from the silent wood,
Swept faintly over the rolling flood;
While floating free o'er the dark'ning scene
As the arch of heaven in its calm serene,
The old flag flaunted its starry fold
Over the ranks of the brave and bold.

IV.

Along the edge of the shadowy wood
The motionless steeds of the leaders stood;
And each waving plume in the twilight seen,
On its sombre background of living green,
Hung ghostly and white in the flitting light
That sported awhile on the brow of Night.

V.

Through their dark gray lines rode the rebel three—
Magruder, Longstreet, and valliant Lee;
While down in the darkness arranged in rank,
To strengthen the far-extending flank,
Old Stonewall lay with his strength and pride,
On Chickahominy's swampy side.

VI.

The whispering leaves, by night-breezes fann'd,
Sent forth the low sound by which silence was broken;
And the beating heart pluck'd by invisible hand,
In the stern, solemn ranks, was the death-telling token
That the Spectre had spread his dark wings o'er the land.
But the sea often smiles, and the wind seems asleep,
Before the storm's chariot sweeps over the deep;
And the morn's brightest hue on Cotopaxi is cast,
Ere its peak becomes dark 'neath the robe of the blast.

VII.

THE SUN WENT DOWN O'ER THE VIRGIN LAND;
But 'twas not the song of the whippoorwill
That rose in the twilight soft and still;
'Twas the clang of arms, and the hoarse command,
And the sharp, clear ring of the falling brand;
The cannon's roar, and the dying groan,
The neighing of steeds, and the feeble moan;
The swelling shout of the charging host,
And the answering shots from the rebel post.

VIII.

Never a look of doubt or fear,
But a loud huzza! and a bursting cheer,
As down the slope went the galloping steed
Of gray-haired Sumner, at headlong speed;
His forehead bath'd by the breath of night,
And his sword baptiz'd in the waves of light.
Firmly bent was that noble head,
As the red spur quicken'd his courser's tread;
And by his side, like a spectre of air,
Brave Meagher rode down through the battle's glare.

IX.

Back from the bellowing mouths of death
The stern blue line retreated,
And the foe swept on with an eager breath,
But his hopes were soon defeated;
For over the clouds of smoke was seen
The shamrock, wreath'd in its fold of green.
The "charge" rings out on the bugle's blast,
And Meagher's Brigade goes hurrying past.

X.

What a bloody picture the scene displays!—
The dark plain red 'neath the cannon's blaze;
The black lines struggling hand to hand,

Like serpents writh'd o'er the shuddering land;
Men falling like leaves 'neath the iron sleet,
To be crush'd by a thousand trampling feet.

XI.

Over the dying, over the dead,
With the blue smoke shrouding each plumed head,
The battery swept with its galloping train,
Shaking the heart of the battle plain;
While the whistling shot and the bursting shell
Shriek'd ever the dirge of the brave as they fell;
And the quivering flame rose fierce and bright
As the lightning's flash, through the arch of night,
While the sentinel star, that gleam'd from afar,
Like a watchlight of blood o'er the field of war,
In the smoke of the battle a moment set,
As the ranks of the charging squadrons met;
While shook the earth with the thundering sound,
And the flame-lit welkin roar'd around.

XII.

Silent and stern, mid the dark array,
O'erlooking the glare of the deepening fray,
The form of the leader was ever nigh,
As column on column went wheeling by;

And his calm voice fann'd, on that sanguine slope,
The trembling flame of his country's hope.
'Twas brave McClellan, whose honored name
Shall yet shine forth on the scroll of fame.
When the carping and envious tongues tnat seek
To darken his deeds shall forget to speak;
His firm command where'er he moved
Brought faith to the trembling heart as it fell,
While the kindly smile of his features proved,
In the tumult of battle, how well he lov'd
The hearts that could honor his love so well.
And now, as he gazed on the plain beneath,
Where the dead like the leaves of the autumn lay,
He heard in each breeze but the sorrowful breath
Of widows and orphans far away.
His bosom heaved with a bursting sigh,
And a bitter tear drop dimm'd his eye;
But the vengeful curl of his bearded lip,
And the sword-hilt press'd with a nervous grip,
And the long-drawn breathing, that choked and
burned,
As the varying tide of the contest turn'd,
Show'd how easily sympathy's sorrow may blight
The heart that is brave in the battle of right.

XIII.

The moon was up, and the cloudless sky
Illum'd by a thousand lamps on high;
But the battle had ceas'd, and night wind's breath
Swept softly over the field of death;
Our wearied soldiers had sunk to rest,
Some pillowing their heads on the pulseless breast;
No sound was heard o'er that streamy plain
Save the sleeper's breath, and the sob of pain;
But the spirit of freedom possess'd the air,
For the flag of the Union still flutter'd there.

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